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An Address,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

HOUSE OF CONVOCATION OF HOBART FREE COLLEGE:

COMMENCEMENT DAY, JULY 15, 1852,

BY JOHN N. WHITING, M. A.

MODERN REFORMS, AND THE DUTY OF THE INSTRUCTED TOWARDS THEM.

AN ADDRESS

Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the

HOUSE OF CONVOCATION

OF

HOBART FREE COLLEGE, AT GENEVA,

COMMENCEMENT DAY,

JULY 15, 1852.

BY JOHN N. WHITING, M. A.,
A Member of the House.

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ADDRESS.

Of the two classes who are invested with academical honors upon festivals like the present—those who confine themselves to Scholastic pursuits, and those whose after life is engrossed by professional or commercial care—no distinctive fact is more prominent, than the view which each takes of the practical and progressive elements of society. These classes respectively underrate and over exalt man's every day life, and labor, and philosophy. The first class see too short an aim, too illogical or unphilosophical a theory, too much unprofitable labor, too many erring instincts, too much wilful self-deception, or fraud upon others, to satisfy the calm composure, the perfection of system and of analysis, the permanence and unity of design, which to their minds is the only wisdom and the only dignity; while the second view abstract truth, the theories of the closet, and the serene tranquility with which the scholar withstands the shock and convulsion, the heat and warfare of out door struggle and progress, as the dreams of a man not half awake to their importance, or the complacency of a man whose reason has smothered his sensibility, or the indolence of a man who has stifled all real emotion until the throb with which all humanity should vibrate, falls upon his heart as upon a stone. To my vision this wall of separation is getting to be higher and stronger. The man of labor is more believing day by day in an education which shall be altogether what he calls practical; and the man of thought is more in doubt day by day

as to the power in right education to adapt itself to the precocious energy, the resistless current of sheer mechananism and utilitarianism to which all human life seems tending. So the one is pressing with sacriligious tread on to the venerable systems, the accuracy and precision of what has heretofore been considered true scholarship, and the other is withdrawing more and more from an alliance which can only pollute the spotless robe of the true seeker after truth; and the very foundation stones of society are upheaved by the merest mountebanks in science and government, while the men who have been taught, view what they believe to be a ruthless and irreclaimable subversion of the soundest principles, not perhaps with indifference, but without an outcry. They will neither direct the storm nor ride upon it, nor breast it; they are content to bend before it, with a narrow chance after it has passed to stand upright in its path of destruction.

That there is a widely extended disposition for reform and progress in the community, no man who is observant of the course of events, or the impression which his own mind receives from such events, can fail to perceive. He may doubt their genuineness or their efficacy, but of the fact itself, he cannot fail to be cognizant. With some who are the chief agents in these progressive changes, this spirit takes a lofty tone of patriotism and of philanthropy, and is manifested in schemes of arresting disease and want and vice, and in developing a higher moral culture, or a more general teaching. With others it is a more theoretical and speculative endeavor, and is shadowed in the sincere and profound utterance of notions teeming with all the wealth and variety which genius, learning and taste can impart, and commending its aims by the rarest virtues and accomplishments; or it is shown in endeavor purely me-

chanical, and all the range of science so far as it can apply to useful art, is sought to be brought home to the relief of all difficulty and danger, of all delays and obstacles. Still another and more common manifestation of this restless spirit is manifested in the individual and associated and declamatory effort to relieve society and government of all their chief regulations and forms. Such are devices to abolish or to modify the different forms of belief, and all reasons for doubt, all the functional relations of society, involving the personal and commercial and political relations; involving too a simplification of the law, and of the different civil institutions which obtain in the community, so that the various moral duties and individual relations of its members shall be established and regulated by the statute book, or be subject to the public supervision and control. Every department of society, every shade of belief, every manufacturing or commercial interest, every school of science and of philosophy has its reformers. Some indeed with well earned claims to that high distinction, when properly bestowed—but the vast majority, self constituted, without a single requisite of such a character, unless it be the simple desire for change. Now this restless working will have its momentous *facts* as a sure consequence. It has them now. Vast destinies hang upon the persevering industry in changing established facts, which teems and hums through every thoroughfare and every bye-lane of existence, which is crawling over the churches, is undermining and upheaving the law, is defiling every sacred relationship, is crouching at the fire-side and making an Inn of every home—industry which wants direction and mastership, thought which wants a moral purpose, moral energy which wants intelligence, theories which want reflection and experience.

Among those who have assumed the profession of reformers, there would seem to be but few who possess the unearthly mould, the conquest of self, which is associated as well by historical facts, as by a sense of natural fitness with such a distinguished calling. The remainder form a class by themselves. Their stock in trade is simple. They are apt to declaim well over existing evils, and to affect a firm faith in *their* plan for their abolition. They usually entertain an acute sense of the shallowness of all the opposing teaching of history. Their peculiar reform is invested with all the attributes of goodness and truth, with the lofty and formal homage, which men lacking an intimate association with an object, generally use. Their particular reform is commonly made the test by which the motive and effect of all human action is judged. They do not need reflection nor experience; because in relation to this Reform there has been no *past*. It is sufficient to condemn any contrary teaching of history, that its facts were not shaped by this reform. Without it, they can scarcely be called facts; they had no real origin, no appropriate effect. It is a sufficient blessing to the Present, that their reformatory spirit is shining in its midst.

So too they are apt to regard all facts and knowledge as unreliable, if disconnected from or disputing their experiment, and their system is thus cut off from whatever aid or confirmation it might derive from the belief or the doubts of others.

Although the modern reformer often claims the loftiest courage, which seems justified by his zeal, yet it is noticeable that he usually shrinks from a substitution of any *definite* plan, for the evils which he seeks to remove. What is to follow either as to its manner of coming, or its identity when it is come, must be left to the exigency or the

inspiration of the moment, or to arrange itself under the light and guidance of his principles.

Another objection is found, to most modern reformers, *in their sources of belief;* which do not seem to allow any speedy arrival at truth. They generally select a single class of cases in their experience as the foundation of their theory. So doing, they need not be, and are not likely to be, astonished at their conclusions. It might surprise a man who deems it discreet or honest to examine all the facts and all the experience, of himself and of others, before adopting his belief. But to the majority of modern agitators this is neither philosophical nor successful. Their faith and its results are best made up by the steady contemplation of facts, or of one fact, from a single point of view, with a careful disregard of all light or effect, except as thus received.

I propose briefly to notice the actual fruits of this spirit of change, thus manifested upon many of the public and individual relations of the country; and without having the time or the willingness fully to consider them, or to commend or to reject them, proceed to remark upon what seems to be the obvious policy of the educated and thinking class towards them as impending and interesting facts.

One of the leading projects now most urgently pressed for the public approval, is the necessity for a change in the rights and position of women. This movement had an intelligent and rightful origin. Intellectual and moral advancement had exposed serious wrongs in woman's position and relations, and had produced a corresponding aptitude in her for increased responsibilities. The exigencies which had cribbed the earlier jurisprudence as it related to the rights of women, had become, with increase of knowledge, the expansion and adjustment of the law,

and the high advancement which females had made in character and capacity, almost rude, and grossly inadequate to her real wants and influence. So the Courts, in their equitable capacity, gradually framed rules shielding to a great extent the property, conjugal rights, and individuality of women. Then statutes were passed for the same benign purpose until every woman, upon due precaution, might enjoy eminent privilege and security.

But these just and obvious reforms are now being distorted and hurried to consequences most alarming to those accustomed and willing to investigate the real bond of union in society, the real foundation of sound morals and right social influences. A chief error in this regard, is the substitution of a thoroughly *public* instruction, a mere *intellectual* training, a promiscuous intercourse and acquaintanceship, the chance morality which the leisure, or the inclination of the public instructor may suggest, and the incitements to a *public* career, for the protection and guidance, and the numberless moral influences of a Home. The discreet government and subordination which always pervades the just family relation, which more than any thing else forms character, establishes virtue, and a proper appreciation of one's own position and the rights of others, which is the root of all reverence and loyalty, is to be superceded, and men and women are to grow up as best they may, so that when they are up, the Senate house and the Courts, the surgeon's table and the itinerant lecturer's room, the stump, and the public service, shall be the common receptacle of all. In this scheme, the men of thought are the last to awaken to its noxious influence, while the mountebank and adventurer, with nothing to lose, and allured by the chance of a brief notoriety and a hazardous agitation, are allowed to crawl into the legistative halls and

places of trust, and induce the weakening or subversion of the most cherished principles and relations. Now these results may not now be inevitable, but may they not become so? The rights of women and their appropriate influence, may not be fully developed. But in the effort towards development, is not the home influence and teaching becoming less? Is not a strange and monstrous delusion fast growing over the public mind as to the right moral sphere of females? Every true woman has in shame and sorrow, acknowledged to her own conscience, that the high priest of the human heart, which has heretofore been clothed in flowing robes, has lowered her lofty calling in the flaunting of a savage attire, and the frantic scoldings of the Forum and the Tribune. The reverence and subordination, so necessary in life's discipline, are becoming, as principles of education, fossil remains, rarely found and negligently preserved.

Another great change has already come over the public sentiment in respect to the relation of debtor and creditor. This too had its origin in the harshness of the laws regulating the enforcement of claims. With a proper appreciation of the nature and obligation of these claims when proceeding from mere contracts, came a more humane legislation, commencing with the abolition of imprisonment for debt, and followed by a relaxation, almost yearly, of the legal obligations of the debtor. With this came also a greater change in opinion, and a warm, and to a degree, a false sympathy has been nurtured for those who are indebted, until the whole policy of action in the community, and even of legislation itself, has been in contravention at once of the means of enforcing a debt, and its moral obligation. As a simple proposition, a moralist, or any thinking man, would start at this. The acknowledgment, and rigid sus-

tenance of an obligation, seems to lie at the root of all private or public morality; and it may well be a matter of grave discussion, whether such facts do not indicate a policy of action at once loose and inconsiderate, and most pernicious in its consequences. Here again, the man of thought has withheld the obvious philosophical deduction from this fact, while the men of mere action and sympathy could not comprehend its tendency and influence, to say nothing of the declamation of the demagogue or the insidious pleading of the professional debtor. As a natural consequence of the facts just detailed, is the growing inclination *for the absolute repudiation of contracts.* This most pestilent spirit has gotten vitality and shape, more from a toleration of its first advances, than from any deep rooted sympathy, or real belief in its principles. I do not regard the indignities and riots, and infamous pretensions of the mere renowned repudiators of contracts, as presenting the real ground of alarm. Such outbreaks often accompany popular excitement; but what seems most desperate and serious in view of their organization, is the fact that their principle of action is tolerated for a moment as a matter of discussion and treaty, to be calmly surveyed, and deliberately reflected on, as to its political and party aspects. It is the supineness and indifference, the absolute ignoring of this most vital treason, which is the shameful and startling fact, and which is pressed home upon us at every election with humiliating significance. It elects Governors and Judges, and we all so far lack courage and patriotism, as to appeal to it to do so. The leading thought in the state has withheld its argument and reprobation and entreaty, until the Anti-rent principles are part of the party stock in trade, and its party an *estate* in the commonwealth.

Another deeply interesting so-called Reform, to a class

in the community, is the change in the practice and proceedings in our Courts. While I believe this to be in part well founded and well intended, I cannot forbear referring to it as significant of the way in which changes are wrought in these latter years. There was no attempt here to conform the splendid system of pleading and practice, which had been wrought out in the acutest love for justice, by some of the master minds of the world, to the later wants of the people; there was no attempt to make the change gradual, but it was sweeping, instantaneous, and the whole litigation of the country with its boundless interests was to be marshalled under a new and untried discipline. What was most diverting, to those who were in a position to be amused, was the fact, that while the new system was of the greatest professed liberality, it was in fact in some points more stringent and arbitrary than the old; and the courts were invested with new powers; among others, with an enlarged "discretion." Now it is not easy to peceive wherein Judicial discretion is better than any other. The only historical record we have of a government of judges, presents the fact that the people became so over burdened, that they petitioned for and obtained an absolute monarchy. We have no record, that under the oppressing tyranny which followed, they ever sought to restore their former government. The better conviction among the experienced and reflecting is, that rights and liberty are better secured, and more easily determined, where the administration of jurisprudence is regulated by fixed rules.

There is still another of the same kind of Reform, as it is called, and one which has attracted a large share of the public thought, although great inaccuracy now exists in respect to it. I mean the *responsibility of the public press for*

what it may utter. Upon no point is the question of abstract right more nicely presented. How far the public press has a right to expose or to comment upon a fact personal to an individual; when the truth is to be uttered, and when suppressed, and how far a publisher ought to be punishable for a falsehood published; and whether the public can have any interest, or ought to have any control over a transaction relating to an individual; are all purely abstract in their nature and elucidation, yet having most interesting practical effects hanging upon them. Perhaps in an assembly like this, great unanimity of opinion may exist upon this subject; yet there are advocates for the extremest license in the press, and legislatures are beseiged by those whose love of notoriety or more vicious impulses incite them to the effort, of extending such license, and it seems almost inviolable that the public sentiment and even the *law* will give way before the pressure, unless those who know what constitutes a right, and who appreciate its inviolability and delicate chastity, shall interfere and enlighten and control those whose education or chances will not permit their reflection upon the subject.

The revival in these latter days of the notion, that an individual may neglect obedience to, or oppose a legislative act which does not accord with his private judgement, although it involves no new principle to those familiar with ecclesiastical history, is a doctrine which latterly is regarded by many as a recent discovery, and is hailed as a leading Reform. Amidst the clamor which this discussion has created, I feel great doubt as to the benefit of its renewal here. I have thought it proper in connection with my subject, to say that, while the enlightened opinion in the community seems to be that obedience to an enactment solemnly and deliberately passed, is the unavoidable duty

of every citizen, especially where the law making power has *jurisdiction over the subject of the law*, yet I cannot but regret that the exposition of the principle has not been more accurately and carefully made, and that there has not been more effort to reduce the principle to the common apprehension, and to commend it by such exposition, and such relief from partizanship and demagogueism, as would ensure its acceptance in the popular mind. It is true that many of the statesmen of the country have invested this principle with the loftiest motives of patriotism, and defended it with vivid eloquence and zeal, but it has been presented under an odious association, to which it was made subordinate; while the great fact involved, entering so inestimably into the very nature and compact of citizenship, has not been pressed home as a cardinal moral precept, unswerving and eternal. Those who have no personal interest in enforcing the opposite of this principle, the scholar, the man of reflection and experience, are eminently fitted to induce an acquiescence for it in the popular symyathies and belief. Such an introduction of principle, by men rightly learned and of willing influence, is to me a most interesting bond of union, full of promise to the maintenance of a sound faith, and a corresponding action throughout the state, tending to elevate the common notions and philosophy, and to give them an object and an effect.

But I am prolonging these remarks more than I had hoped. I am obliged to omit any consideration of the prevailing opinions respecting the immunities and authority of a majority among the people. The individualizing, the awe and worship, of what is called *public opinion*, and more particularly of the tendency which is now obtaining towards a principle of association for all purposes, and its

likelihood to impair, or to supercede the sense of personal responsibility, the self-erected and defended and sacredly private morality of the individual. One of the most impressive and curious topics of investigation within my knowledge, is the final issue and moral effect of the wide maintenance of this principle of association. It is entirely new, and as yet free from being satisfactorily tested. It cannot long remain so. I am obliged to omit also, any remarks upon what is to be apprehended from the various specifics and useful inventions, by which the common processes of teaching are to be abbreviated, and learning to become the instinct and inheritance of every man.

Of the important fact, that every true patriot and every well instructed man should be a Reformer, in the enlarged and earnest meaning of the term, and the gross deficiency of understanding and of motive which exists in those whose principles and taste seem to forbid their giving encouragement or direction to the many healthful changes, which are being pressed upon the public mind, I should grieve to be silent. I believe that there must be, as an inevitable destiny, great changes in all the callings of labor; in much of the social and even of the moral and religious philosophy by which men act and feel. It indicates a miserable use both of the facts and the deductions of history, a coldness of sensibility, a harshness of faith, and an infirm moral purpose, to rest in contentment with present, attainments and to dread or condemn proposed changes, either from excessive veneration for old systems, or from jealousy of extending privilege and advancement to a larger class. No! the purer, safer doctrine is, to foster all true reforms, and to seek the elevation and freedom of all men every where. But in this progress, let men of education and experience be the leaders and the guides, and not entrust it to the

blind and the halt, nor any one of those whose only association would seem to have been with bedlam.

These several Reforms, adverted to to-day, with their causes and phenomena, are so far as I can see, deeply problematical, and weighing for a final venture vast destinies for evil or good, for widely ranging and devastating sequences; or for the highest progress, advancement, relief and elevation.

Let them come when they will, their shock and conflict must be borne by men and women of right education, of earnest faith, of self-knowledge and knowledge of their kind; no vacant theorist, no musty student, nor cold formalist, nor refined speculator, nor vapid demagogue, nor scheming adventurer; no courtiers nor clowns, will be the reliance or the hope of humanity then. It is your genuine man, strong in the purpose of hearty impulses, a just belief, a mind attuned to harmonize and respond to human joy and sorrow, a self-conqueror—who will then be called of all the people, whose might only can prevail.

And, so briefly to sum the matter, I would have the men of thought and of teaching, become also men of labor, in sympathy, in acquisition, in active energy and influence over the interests and impulses, the heaving, restless tumult of daily life and struggle.

Worshippers of truth, and denizens of its high domains, let them come out among the mass, contending with shams and formulas, just bursting, many of them, through the incrustation of ages of wrong and error, of pride, avarice and delusion.

Apostles of freedom! armed with its sacred rights, let them commend its spirit and teaching, by the exercise of truth, justice and enlightenment, and illumine unto all a clear perception of the dignity, usefulness and appropri-

ateness of true labor, directed by an upright thought ; and the beneficence and splendor, the undying glory and sacredness of a careful thought, directed to the duties and the objects of inevitable and eternal labor.

It is appropriate to this subject, and accords with my own emotions, to refer with exultation and hope to the change of position which the aid of a munificent corporation has enabled our alma mater to take. Not one of us will question either the genuineness or the practical use of this Reform. It is, we believe, the beginning of a system of education which shall go on until every man may be instructed if not learned, and full mental and moral development shall be free, and pure as the air and the sunlight. Upon no academical association could this high precedence be more appropriately bestowed. It is due to the just control, the accurate instruction, and the principles of honor and of morality which have uniformly prevailed here, that in making the investigation of science and truth free to all, the light of the glorious principle taught should first go out from Geneva College. GENEVA COLLEGE, no more ! but however much we may wish to linger over the old name and its associations, we shall all invoke for the new organization the highest prosperity and widest usefulness.

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